ONCE A FIGHTER PILOT...

He hadn't changed much. Thinner, maybe even a little gaunt. Or was it the light? He stood in the green dimness of the control room, a maroon sweater draped casually on his form. The last of the "Original Seven" glanced up at Houston's huge Lunar Module simulator, then at the banks of flickering consoles. The room was cool. An air-conditioning system droned monotonously off in some distant place. His gaze shifted to the surrounding engineers and he murmured a few words. Finally, we shook hands and I told him what we needed. "Okay," he said, "you can get a few pictures now before this training session. We'll talk later."

Talking to Captain Alan Shepard is a revealing experience. He exhibits two distinct sides. On one hand he is serious and completely logical. Persuasive. But he counterpoints his forcefulness with injections of humor and wit.

On May 5, 1961, I watched from the deck of the USS *Lake Champlain* as he was brought aboard following his historic sub-orbital flight in *Freedom 7*. The carrier's crew gave him a tremendous ovation. A couple of hours later, America's First Man in Space hopped aboard my C-l *Trader,* and we were off to Grand Bahama Island where he would undergo an extensive debriefing and physical examination. No sooner had I cleared the bow than he was out of his seat in the cabin and up into the cockpit, with that big wide grin spread across his face. Shouting above the noise of the COD's engines, he described his morning's monumental adventure, and it was easy to see he had been on top of the world, literally.

National Geographic photographer Dean Conger was on board, too, and, after a series of pictures were taken, I pointed up ahead to where the Bahamas were coming into view. By then it was mid-afternoon and, as usual, tall build-ups were forming over each island. I commented to Shepard that it would be a shame to spoil his day by running into a batch of bad weather. (The strip at Grand Bahama has no instrument facility.) He looked the situation over thoughtfully, then laughed: "Swell! Let's divert to Nassau and pitch a liberty!"

Unfortunately, we made it into GBI in good shape.

The Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston has been described by some writers as cathedral or monastic, a sanctified place wherein astronauts preside as high priests. It doesn't hit *me* that way; rather, it is a geometric setup, neat and quiet. In the middle of the complex there is a duck pond surrounded by carefully trimmed walkways. To get from one building to another you have to make a few right angle turns to avoid walking on the grass. Most people follow the Center's obvious rules of the road.

But when Alan Shepard came out of the LM simulator that afternoon, and I suggested we go over to the pond to get some pictures of him with a watery background, it was interesting to observe how he got there. In a straight line. Over bushes, through a garden, across the lawns and up and down a few grassy banks. It was characteristic.

Visiting with Captain Shepard was originally part of a two-fold mission: I needed some current studies of him in order to do a painting for the National Air and Space Museum; and, at the same time, it seemed a good opportunity to gather some fresh impressions of our astronauts for the readers of *Naval Aviation* News. But something else came of it — this special treatment of Space and the Navy.

It had been said that Alan Shepard is the "intellectual" of the astronauts. He has his own ideas about that. But as Vice Admiral Tom Connolly, DCNO(Air) — who knew him well as a test pilot — puts it, "Alan Shepard is one of the sharpest pilots and officers I ever met. He really has it. There was never a doubt in my mind that he had all the makings for eventually becoming an admiral."

Shepard's own view of his Navy experience focuses on flying. "Operating from carriers at night," he says, "was the hardest kind of flying I've ever done — or ever expect to do. I've said for a long time it's what separates the men from the boys." Today he flies T-38's or the LLTV (lunar landing training vehicle) — Bell's Flying Bedstead. Only, you don't fly that one in terms of hours, just minutes. The weird machine provides the pilot with the same thrust and ratio vectors as he gets with the lunar module.

Since that memorable day in May of 1961, Shepard's life has been a long series of successes — and frustrations. As America's first space hero, he rode the crest of a national publicity wave. Of that experience a few things stand out in his mind. Like the time he waited, all silvery suited up and ready to go, just inside Hangar S at the Cape. On the other side of the door were the reporters, anxious to see which

Alan Shepard
as photographed by
JOC James Johnston

Once a Fighter Pilot

Above, Shepard carves a pair of crude sandals – one of his activities during survival exercises for the Mercury astronauts in the Nevada desert – training for the possibility of a land recovery.

At left, the jubilant astronaut cracks jokes on his way to Grand Bahama island. Above, the first American in space accepts congratulations from President Kennedy. The other six astronauts are in background.

of the three "finalists" (Glenn, Grissom or Shepard) would emerge and make his way out to the loxed-up *Mercury Redstone*. Months of training lay behind and now the moment was at hand. The tension built as he waited with growing impatience for the word to open the door and face the crowd. Instead, the flight was cancelled. He had to wait three more days to start the whole thing again.

The subsequent triumph threw him into the spotlight. He now says he wishes he had a dollar for every picture that was taken of him — because then he could retire. (Actually, investments in banking and real estate have made him more than financially sound.) "In the beginning," he states, "there was a lot of glamour and excitement. It was new to the public. But there really wasn't that much to it. John Glenn went through a lot more than I did."

When Shepard went to the White House to receive NASA's Distinguished Service Medal, he recalls that President Kennedy was nervous and dropped it. From the background came the voice of the President's wife saying, "Pick it up, Jack." Mr. Kennedy retrieved the medal, handed it to Shepard, and declared: "This decoration has gone from the ground up."

Months later, in a similar ceremony for John Glenn, as the President was about to bestow the award again, Shepard whispered to him, "Don't drop it!" Mr. Kennedy broke up over that one.

During the years that followed, Alan Shepard became known as "Hard Luck Al." He was a backup pilot for the final *Mercury* shot (MA-9) and then tried relentlessly to get approval for one last solo flight for himself. The capsule had already been completed. (MA-l0 was named *Freedom 7-II* and is now stored in the National Air and Space Museum in mint condition.) At a White House dinner, after checking with NASA's James Webb, Shepard asked Mr. Kennedy for approval of MA-l0. It was to be an extra flight of protracted duration. The President deferred the question, saying that the decision would be up to NASA. MA-10 never went.

When the *Gemini* program started, he was scheduled again. Then ear trouble developed and Shepard was grounded. "The difficulty," he says, "was termed Meniere's syndrome — a form of dizziness. The problem is not considered very significant for an earthbound person, but it sure can finish you as a pilot. I convinced myself it would eventually work itself out. But it didn't.

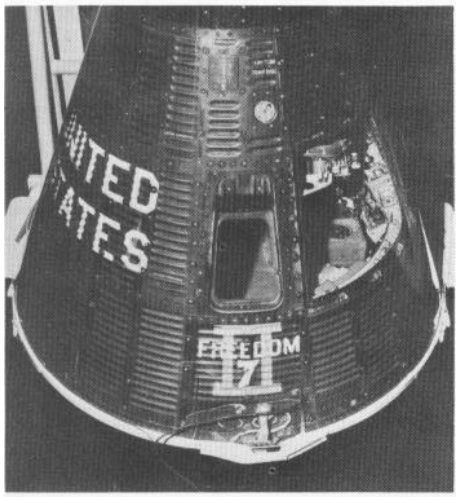
"Tom Stafford had told me about Dr. House, out in Los Angeles, who could perform an operation on this particular kind of inner ear trouble. At first it sounded a little risky but, in 1968, I finally decided on having it done.

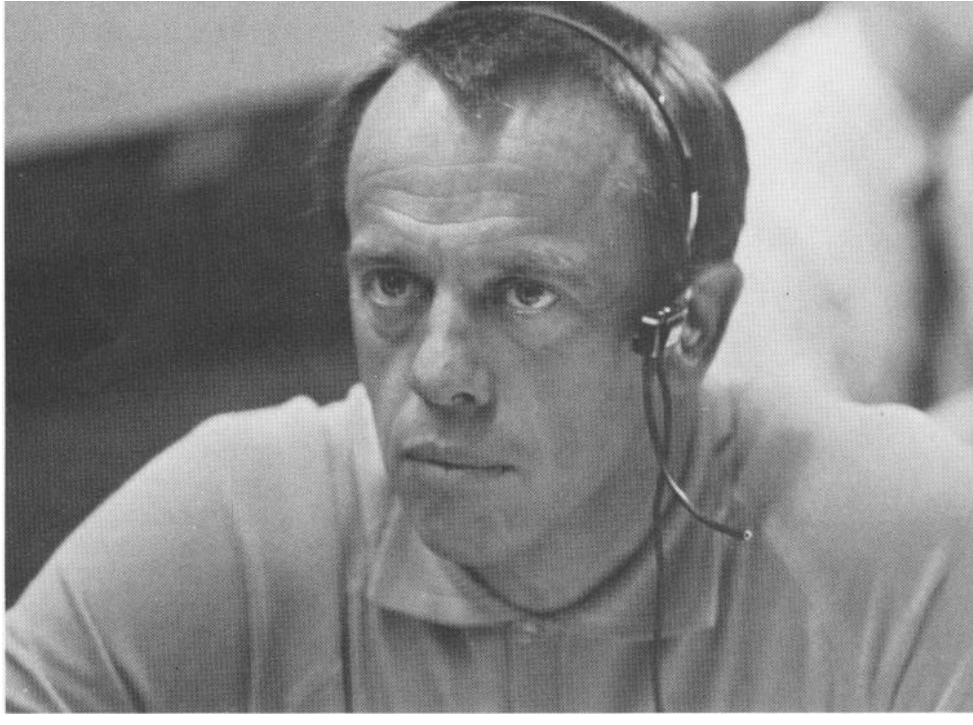
"With NASA's permission, I went out to California. In order to keep the whole business quiet, Dr. House and I agreed that I should check into the hospital under an assumed name. It was the doctor's secretary who came up with it. So, as Victor Poulis, I had the operation and six months later my ear was fine."

In the meantime, Shepard had accepted the position as Chief of the Astronaut Office, becoming a major guiding force in the training, conduct and assignment of the other astronauts. The performance of this duty required a certain amount of apparent detachment which has at times been misinterpreted as aloofness. There are those who consider Shepard cool or even unfeeling. Reporters and associates alike comment on his ability to control the mood of a meeting or conversation.

But what really lies beneath his demeanor, and what is naturally overlooked or misunderstood by those outside the environment, is the basic fact that he is an aviator — a test pilot — and that he functions in a very similar fashion to, and responds to the responsibilities of, a typical commanding officer of an elite squadron.

Shepard is proud of his Navy background and, be-





Freedom 7-II, above, never flew. It is now stored in the Smithsonian Institution. At right, Shepard monitors communications at Mission Control in Houston as he sweats out the safe return of Apollo 13.

cause of this, is well aware of its contributions to the space program over the years — largely little known facts or unrecognized achievements by Navy scientists and men. For example, during *Mercury*, Shepard himself was involved with the planning for recovery operations of the capsules and pilots. Tracking and locating where his major interests and numerous aids were developed and employed to insure success — UHF and HF radio beacons, fluorescent dye markers, high intensity lights and special Navy depth bombs *(Sofar*)* that explode beneath the ocean surface below the floating spacecraft, sending sound waves through the water to shore stations thousands of miles away.

As he spoke of these things, and of the "spinoffs" of the program which are so beneficial to the public, the original idea of doing a "close-up" for *Naval Aviation News* began to expand into a larger concept. The end result of that thinking is this special edition. It is not meant to be a detailed technical history but, instead, a broad-brush view of just some of the individuals of the Navy who have, each in his own way, helped extend the reach of Man beyond the confines of this planet — men who have also stimulated progress in the pursuit of a better life here at home.

Effort has been made to avoid a "rehash" of familiar material. Much of the information presented concerns fairly obscure Navy men who worked behind the scenes. It is largely about imagination, persistence, success, failures and accomplishments.

To this end, Alan Shepard stands as a symbol. The story of how he fought to overcome the obstacles to his return to space is not surprising to those who have known him for years. His record at Admiral Farragut Academy reveals early leadership potential (and a genius-level IQ of 145). After graduation from Annapolis in 1944, he was assigned to the destroyer USS *Cogswell* before going on to Corpus Christi and Pensacola. In the interim he took civilian flying lessons to better prepare himself for his future. Designated a Naval Aviator in 1947, he joined Fighter Squadron 4B (VF-4B) and then VF-42, flying *Corsairs* from the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt.* He had test pilot training at Patuxent River and remained there from January 1951 until July 1957 — a period interspersed with duty in VF-193, a night fighter squadron flying F2H *Banshees.*

Of that tour he recalls an incident, while operating off the USS *Oriskany,* when he had difficulty finding the ship. His radio had failed and it was one of those nights when things began to go so wrong — the edge of panic seeped in. He considered his situation and thought: "Shape up, Al! You're never going to get anywhere if you just sit out here and start worrying about it." So, keeping his thinking machine on the move, he worked out the problem and made it back to the ship okay. It was a principle he has consistently applied, as have thousands of successful aviators.

The fact that the 47-year-old astronaut has hung on to the program with such tenacity prompts a question: *Why?* The others of his original group have each gone their separate ways but, over the years, he has continued to maintain an arduous training schedule. He certainly hasn't done it for the money, and there were all manner of alternatives he could have pursued with a high degree of success.

In answer to that question, the commander of the forthcoming *Apollo 14,* Captain Alan Bartlett Shepard, Jr., grins. And then he says, "Once a fighter pilot, what else can a fighter pilot do?"

— COMMANDER TED WILBUR, 1970

*Sound Fixing and Ranging